Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum

28

Michael D. Swartz

Mystical Prayer in Ancient Judaism

An Analysis of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*

ARTIBUS INGENUIS J·C·B·M· 1·8·0·1

Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum

herausgegeben von
Martin Hengel und Peter Schäfer

28

Mystical Prayer in Ancient Judaism

An Analysis of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*

by

Michael D. Swartz

J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) Tübingen

Die Deutsche Bibliothek – CIP-Einheitsaufnahme

Swartz, Michael D.:
Mystical prayer in ancient Judaism : an analysis of Ma'aseh Merkavah /
by Michael D. Swartz. – Tübingen : Mohr, 1992
(Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum ; 28)
Einheitssacht. des kommentierten Werkes: Ma'aśe merkāvā <engl.>
ISBN 3-16-145679-3
NE: Ma'aseh Merkavah; EST des kommentierten Werkes; GT
978-3-16-158710-8 Unveränderte eBook-Ausgabe 2019

The book was typeset by Gulde-Druck in Tübingen using Baskerville typeface, printed by Gulde-Druck in Tübingen on acid-free paper from Papierfabrik Buhl in Ettlingen and bound by Heinr. Koch in Tübingen.

ISSN 0721-8753

For Suzanne

Preface

This study began as my doctoral dissertation, "Liturgical Elements in Early Jewish Mysticism: A Literary Analysis of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*," presented to the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Literatures of New York University in May 1986. I have added an introduction and revised several chapters. In the introduction, which is based on the textual analysis carried out in the body of the study, the implications of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* for the study of the history of Judaism are assessed.

My interest in *Ma'aseh Merkavah* grows out of my longstanding interest in the language and history of Jewish prayer and in the history of Judaism in Late Antiquity. Upon reading Gershom Scholem's compelling account of Merkavah mysticism, I became interested in the possibilities the Hekhalot texts held for these areas and for examining the relationship between religious experience and literary expression. Upon confronting the texts themselves, and in light of the work done by Peter Schäfer and others on these texts, I became aware that methods needed to be developed for dealing with the historical and textual problems presented by the literature. This study is an effort to address such questions.

Portions of Chapter 11 appeared in my article, "*'Alay le-Shabbeaḥ: A Liturgical Prayer in Ma'aseh Merkavah*" (JQR 77 [1986–87]). Portions of Chapter 16 appeared as "Patterns of Mystical Prayer in Ancient Judaism: Progression of Themes in *Ma'aseh Merkavah*," in *New Perspectives on Ancient Judaism*, edited by Paul V. M. Flescher (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990).

Many teachers, colleagues, and friends have contributed to my work. I have had wise and attentive advisers at New York University. Professors Baruch A. Levine, Francis E. Peters of New York University, Ross R. Brann, now of Cornell University, and Martin A. Cohen of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, served as readers of my thesis. As my principal adviser and as a colleague, Professor Lawrence H. Schiffman, has been exceptionally generous with his time, advice, and knowledge. I am especially grateful for his counsel and encouragement. My research has also benefited from conversations and communications with the late Professor Alexander

Altmann and with Professors Peter Schäfer, Martin S. Cohen, Elizabeth Waller, Carol Newsom, Morton Smith, and David Blumenthal. At the University of Virginia, my colleagues Professors Gary Anderson, Benjamin Ray and Robert Wilken have made helpful suggestions and criticisms. My thanks also to Professor Schäfer for his interest in this book, and to Ms. Leslie Kobayashi for preparing the indexes. Of course, I alone am responsible for any errors or shortcomings in my work.

This book is also a product of deeper influences. Rabbi Elihu Schagrin, Emeritus of Temple Concord in Binghamton, New York, is responsible for much of my interest in Jewish religion and its sources. I will always be grateful to my parents, Bernard and Marcella Swartz, for their support, and to my brother Steven for his friendship. It is my hope that my work reflects their integrity and love of learning. This book is dedicated to my wife, Suzanne Silver, whose work and life continue to enrich mine immeasurably.

Jerusalem, November 1990 Michael D. Swartz

Contents

Part IV
Literary Features of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*

Part V
Conclusions

Introduction

Prayer is an important part of religious discourse and practice. Yet apart from the disciplines of liturgical history or theology, the study of prayer as a phenomenon in the history of religions has not often received systematic attention. In recent years, scholars have begun to ask how prayer functions in the context of a religious culture. New emphasis has been placed on examining the active or performative function of the language of prayer as against its informational or expressive function. Prayer, we have learned, is not only to supposed to say something; it is supposed to do something.

This study is a form-critical and historical analysis of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, an anthology of Jewish mystical prayers of Late Antiquity. It is primarily an evaluation of the place of this text and of the forms of religion it reflects in the history of Jewish religion, and of the relationship of its ideas and literary forms to other liturgies and themes of ancient Judaism. But it is also an inquiry into the changing functions of prayer texts within a tradition of visionary mysticism, and how their literary forms reflect these functions.

I. Prayer and Religious Traditions

Contemporary students of prayer have done much to revise the views of the role of prayer in religion proposed by earlier historians of religion, notably by Frederich Heiler. Heiler, in his classic comparative study *Prayer*,[1] distinguished personal prayer from ritual prayer as set forth in prayer texts and liturgies. He considered the former to be true, authentic prayer, the latter secondary developments, artificial and of little value for the study of the dynamic relationship of the individual to God:

[1] F. Heiler, *Prayer: A Study in the History and Psychology of Religion*; trans. S. McComb and J.E. Park (1932).

> Prayer is at first a spontaneous, emotional discharge, a free outpouring of the heart. In the course of development, it becomes a fixed formula which people recite without feeling or mood of devotion, untouched both in heart and mind.[2]

Theorists such as Heiler saw such features as the use of repetition, stock formulae, and scriptural citations as marking the degeneration of prayer from the purely spiritual to the merely ritual. In fact, these very characteristics of the language of prayer actually constitute important evidence for the religious meaning and purpose of prayer. Such formulae are essential components of the cultural vocabulary of participants in traditional religions, often inseparable from their common vocabulary. Carl Keller, evaluating the place of prayer in mystical texts, observes:

> Prayers always give voice to a deep sense of God's presence, but they are formulated in traditional religious and theological language, and the praying believer never separates himself from the solid conceptual framework of his spiritual life.[3]

Not only are such formulae integral components of religious expression, they fulfill important functions in achieving the goals of prayer. Current studies of prayer have assigned a new importance to the formulaic language of prayer. Influenced by J. L. Austin's categories of performative language,[4] these scholars stress the power of words and formulae to do what the speaker intends over the information conveyed by those words.[5] A prayer not only expresses the worshipper's state of mind, or proclaims or teaches doctrine; it is an actor in a ritual context.[6] A given prayer is often intended to alter the

---

[2] Heiler, *Prayer*, 64.

[3] C. Keller, "Mystical Literature," in S. Katz, (ed.), *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, (1978), 94.

[4] Austin, J. L., *How to Do Things with Words*, edited by J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (1975). Cf. M. Silverstein, "Language Structure and Linguistic Ideology," in P.R. Clyne, W.F. Hanks, and C.L. Hofbauer, *The Elements: A Parasession on Linguistic Units and Levels* (1979), 193–247.

[5] For a survey of current research on prayer, see Gill, "Prayer," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. An very useful recent consideration of the problem of prayer and its poetics in anthropology is P. Metcalf, *Where are you, Spirits* (1989); see especially the introduction, 1–27. The following studies are based on fieldwork and are primarily concerned with the function of ritual language in nonliterate societies: R. Finnegan, "How to Do Things with Words: Performative Utterances among the Limba of Sierra Leone," *Man*, n.s. 4 (1969) 537–52; S. Gill, "Prayer as Person: The Performative Force in Navaho Prayer Acts," *History of Religions* 17 (1977), 143–57; Gill, *Native American Religious Action: A Performance Approach to Religion* (1987); *Sacred Words: A Study of Navaho Religion and Prayer* (1981); B. Ray, "Performative Utterances in African Ritual," *History of Religions* 13 (1973), 16–35; see also S.J. Tambiah, "The Magical Power of Words," *Man*, n.s. 3 (1968) 177–208; cf. W. Wheelock, "The Problem of Ritual Language: From Information to Situation," *JAAR* 50 (1982), 49–71. On the study of Jewish prayer, see below, n. 8.

[6] On this point see especially Gill, "Prayer as Person."

mood or state of mind of the worshipper or community of worshippers; it may also be intended to affect the relationship between the worshipper and God, the Divine forces, or the world. Analysis of rhetorical and conventional features of a prayer text can uncover these functions.

The role of prayer in mysticism bears on these questions in significant ways. For as mysticism is seen as having its roots in an individual's experience, prayer in mysticism is often seen in terms of its effect on this experience.[7] Prayer may express a mystical state, but it may also serve to engender a mystical state. As we shall see, the latter function has been ascribed to prayer in ancient Jewish mysticism by earlier scholars of the phenomenon. This hypothesis is questioned and tested below in the case of *Ma'aseh Merkavah.*

II. Prayer Texts in Judaism and Diachronic Analysis

The earlier views of prayer described above have also come under criticism from students of ancient Jewish prayer. R. Sarason argues that prayer in classical Judaism, far from being the "very hearthstone of all piety,"[8] must be seen in the context of the Rabbinic system of worship, which stresses study and the performance of statutory obligations. T. Zahavy argues for a distinction between the study of prayer texts and the treatment of and evidence for prayer as an act.[9]

[7] It is not the purpose of this study to address the problem of the terms mysticism and magic. For our purposes the term mysticism will be used heuristically to refer to the active effort of a person or persons to apprehend God directly, especially by means of a vision. The term magic in the context of ancient Judaism will refer to the use of ritual procedures involving divine names for practical purposes. On the problem of magic in ancient and medieval Judaism, see briefly M.D. Swartz, "Scribal Magic and Its Rhetoric: Formal Patterns in Medieval Hebrew and Aramaic Incantation Texts from the Cairo Genizah" *HTR* 83 (1990), 163–80 and L.H. Schiffman and M.D. Swartz, *Hebrew and Aramaic Incantation Texts from the Cairo Genizah: Selected Texts from Taylor-Schechter Box K1* (in press), Introduction. There an argument is made that the term magic is useful in the context of ancient and medieval Judaism as a category describing a distinct set of rhetorical and literary forms. It is not supposed here that there is an essential dichotomy between magic and religion.

[8] Heiler, *Prayer*, quoted in R. Sarason, "Religion and Worship," in J. Neusner (ed.), *Take Judaism, for Example* (1983), 49–65.

[9] T. Zahavy, "A New Approach to Early Jewish Prayer," in B. Bokser (ed.), *The History of Judaism: The Next Ten Years* (1980), 45–60. Gill also urges the consideration of prayer as an act. See "Prayer;" *Religious Action*; see especially pp. 89–146 on the problem of textuality in relation to prayer acts; and *Sacred Words*. On methodology in the study of Jewish prayer, see R. Sarason, "The Modern Study of Jewish Liturgy," and "Recent Developments in the Study of Jewish Liturgy," in J. Neusner (ed.), *The Study of Ancient Judaism*, vol. 1 (1981),

These scholars argue rightly for an approach which stresses placing the texts of prayer in the context of systemic analysis. Yet if the prayer in its legal or liturgical context plays its part in expressing the system of the community doing the praying, the prayer texts themselves often express something different. They express, among other things, the dynamics of the perceived relationship between the worshipper and God. God is referred to in one set of rules of discourse or activity – those of theology or law. But He is approached, addressed, entreated, praised, threatened, or thanked in another – the rhetorical canons of prayer.[10] Texts of prayer can have their own histories, and their own intrinsic formal and substantive characteristics which allow them to be set into their various contexts. The internal rhetoric of a prayer allows it to do something, while subsequent use of the text often makes it do something quite different. In such cases this disparity between a prayer's rhetorical dynamic and its contextual function is often manifest in how that prayer has been altered, truncated, or ornamented to serve its new role.

This problem calls for a distinction between the prayer and its rhetoric on the one hand, and its legal or literary context on the other. Such a distinction is made in the case of an ancient anthology of prayers such as *Ma'aseh Merkavah* through diachronic form-critical analysis of the text. By separating prayer passages from their redactional context, such an analysis can reveal the criteria and purposes for which the prayers were initially composed, and go on to describe how they were used in the system of the redactors. In addition, this analysis yields evidence for discrete layers of development of a religious phenomenon. It will be seen that prayer was used in *Ma'aseh Merkavah* for several distinct purposes, and that these purposes stand in significant contrast to the role of prayer in classical Rabbinic Judaism.[11]

Ma'aseh Merkavah also provides evidence for the use of literary units of prayer in contrasting contexts, that of Merkavah mysticism and that of the statutory liturgies of Rabbinic Judaism. The text contains parallels to prayers known from the traditional Jewish Babylonian and Palestinian liturgies. The value of these parallels is both historical and phenomenological; they allow us to determine whether the prayers originated in the mystical or liturgical tradition, and they allow us to see how the prayers operate in both contexts.

The purpose of this analysis of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is thus twofold. It is an effort to illumine the historical question of the development of Merkavah

---

107–187; see also S. Reif, "Jewish Liturgical Research: Past, Present, and Future," *JJS* 34 (1983), 161–170.

[10] On this problem cf. the discussion in Metcalf, *Where are You, Spirits*, 3–4.

[11] On the form-critical methodology employed in this study and its implications for the study of Hekhalot literature, see Chapter 1 below.

mysticism as a system of apprehension of and communication with the Divine in Judaism of Late Antiquity. It is also an assessment the role of prayer in this process of development.

III. Merkavah Mysticism

Ma'aseh Merkavah is a central example of the texts of Merkavah mysticism, the visionary Jewish mysticism which flourished in Palestine and Babylonia in the second through eighth centuries, C. E. These texts are known as Hekhalot literature. The significance of Merkavah mysticism was first brought to the attention of scholars by Gershom Scholem in his *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*[12] and *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition.*[13] Scholem demonstrated its importance in the context of Judaism of Late Antiquity and suggested its implications for the study of classical, Rabbinic Judaism. As Scholem demonstrated, the Hekhalot texts contain some of the earliest evidence for Jewish mysticism and theurgy. Unlike other contemporary texts of Rabbinic religion, these texts center not on law, theology, or biblical exegesis, but on journeys purportedly undertaken by their authors through the *Hekhalot*, the seven heavenly "palaces" or chambers, to the Divine Chariot-Throne, the *Merkavah*. This journey, how to achieve it, and its dangers and rewards, are the heart of the literature, its organizing principle.

In *Ma'aseh Merkavah* prayer plays an active role, more so than in any other Hekhalot text. Prayers are seen in the text as the instruments by which the protagonists ascend, experience the vision of the upper realm, and protect themselves from the dangers of that vision. Because of the centrality of prayers and the qualities claimed for them in the text, *Ma'aseh Merkavah* can illuminate the question of the relationship of prayer to religious experience and mysticism in ancient Judaism.

Ma'aseh Merkavah also provides evidence for the changing function of prayer within the Hekhalot tradition. The form-critical analysis undertaken here demonstrates that the text underwent a process of evolution from a collection of prayers to be recited in community with the heavenly hosts, to a prescription for the active cultivation of the individual's ascent to and vision of the upper realm – that is, an evolution from liturgy to theurgy.

---

[12] Second ed. (1954).

[13] Second ed. (1965). For an account of the modern study of Merkavah mysticism, see chapter 1 below.

IV. Prayer in Hekhalot Literature

Prayer is generally regarded as an important testimony to the experiential, mystical character of Hekhalot literature. Merkavah prayer has been seen to be characterized by the use of repetition of synonyms, a hypnotic rhythm, and a numinous quality. P. Bloch first advanced the idea that Merkavah prayer employed these qualities to induce a trance.[14] He noted that strings of synonyms appear in the prayers without reference to specific concepts or deeds of God, and without any logical progression. These passages were, according to Bloch,

> Purely pleonastic and unisonous words which do not in the least assist the process of thought but merely reflect the emotional struggle.[15]

These characteristics were thus seen as more important to the prayers than semantic and theological considerations.

Scholem took this idea further in his description of the prayer of Merkavah mysticism. Inspired by Rudolf Otto's category of the numinous,[16] Scholem saw in the strings of synonyms and what he termed the "pompous" rhetoric of the prayers a "polylogy" directly intended to aid the mystic in his vision of God.

> Almost all the hymns from the Hekhaloth tracts, particularly those whose text has been preserved intact, reveal a mechanism comparable to the motion of an enormous fly-wheel.
> In cyclical rhythm the hymns succeed each other, and within them the adjurations of God follow in a crescendo of glittering and majestic attributes, each stressing and reinforcing the sonorous power of the world. The monotony of their rhythm – almost all consist of verses of four words – and the progressively sonorous incantations induce in those who are praying a state of mind bordering on ecstasy.[17]

Several of the precise patterns which comprise this style have been analyzed in an important series of articles by Johann Maier.[18] Maier shows that the specific forms utilized in *Hekhalot Rabbati* and related texts – simple repetition, litanies of attributes, short clauses describing God, and the like – generate an

---

[14] P. Bloch, "Die *Yorde Merkavah*, die Mystiker der Gaonzeit und ihrer Einfluss auf die Liturgie," *MGWJ*, O.S. 37 (1893), 18–25, 69–74, 257–66, 305–11.

[15] Bloch, *Yorde Merkavah*, 306, cited in Scholem, *Major Trends*, 58; Scholem's translation.

[16] R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (second ed., 1950).

[17] Scholem, *Major Trends*, 59–60.

[18] J. Maier, "'Attah hu 'Adon (Hekhalot Rabbati XXVI 5)," *Judaica* 22 (1966), 209–33; "Hekhalot Rabbati XXVII, 2–5," *Judaica* 21 (1965), 129–33; "Poetisch-liturgische Stücken aus dem 'Buch der Geheimnisse'," *Judaica* 24 (1968), 172–81; "Serienbildung und 'Numinoser' Eindruckseffekt in den poetischen Stücken der Hekhalot-Literatur," *Semitics* 3 (1973), 36–66.

accumulative rhythm which, according to Maier, aids in the process Scholem describes. The literary forms can thus be positively identified by these conspicuous features.

The descriptions of the character and function of Merkavah prayer described above were based to a great extent on *Hekhalot Rabbati*, the text which has been used most often as evidence for Merkavah mysticism.[19] Prayers in *Hekhalot Rabbati* may indeed have been composed for the purposes of engendering a mystical trance. *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, however, exhibits a rather different set of stylistic dynamics, with different implications for the role of prayer in Merkavah mysticism. The prayers which formed the basis for *Ma'aseh Merkavah* were not meant primarily to lift the worshipper from earthly contemplation to heavenly ascent, but to express his participation in an earthly liturgy corresponding to the angelic liturgy. Thus their primary purpose was evocative rather than instrumental. Only later did the authors of the narrative of the text attribute to the prayers the function of producing a vision of the Divine world.

In order to explain this process of evolution, it is necessary to describe *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, its subjects, themes, and strata of redaction. Once this has been accomplished, the character and function of prayer in the text will be analyzed, and the role of the text in the phenomenon of Merkavah mysticism will be evaluated.

V. *Ma'aseh Merkavah*

In 1946, Alexander Altmann published, from an important manuscript of Hekhalot literature, excerpts of a previously unpublished Hekhalot text.[20] Later Gershom Scholem published the entire text in *Jewish Gnosticism*,[21] giving it the name *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, "the work of the [Divine] Chariot" on the basis of a citation from Eleazar of Worms' *Sode Razaya'*.[22] *Ma'aseh Mer-*

[19] On *Hekhalot Rabbati* see Scholem, *Gnosticism*, 6; I. Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism* (1980), 150–173; and M. Smith, "Observations on Hekhalot Rabbati," in A. Altmann, (ed.) *Biblical and Other Studies* (1963), 142–160; D. Blumenthal, *Understanding Jewish Mysticism* 1 (1978).

[20]. A. Altmann, "*Shire Qedushah be-Sifrut ha-Hekhalot ha-Qedumah*," *Melilah* 2 (1946), 1–24. Scholem, however, did not acknowledge Altmann's prior publication.

[21] Pp. 103–17. On the manuscripts used by Altmann and Scholem, see Chapter 2 below.

[22] See *Gnosticism*, 76, 101. On this title, see Chapter 1, n. 18 below. The term *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is used in Rabbinic literature to denote the study and description of the great Chariot-throne of God, first described in the prophetic visions of Isaiah and Ezekiel. This throne is described in great detail in several of the Hekhalot texts, especially *Hekhalot*

kavah is included in Peter Schäfer's definitive synoptic edition of Hekhalot literature. Schäfer's edition forms the basis for this study.[23]

Altmann understood *Ma'aseh Merkavah* as an anthology of Hekhalot prayers to be recited in conjunction with the liturgical *qedushah*, the "sanctification," in which Isa. 6:3 is recited. He pointed out the longstanding relationship between visionary literature and hymn, and emphasized the liturgical references in the hymns.[24] He also dated the hymns in the first section of the text[25] to an earlier stage of Hekhalot literature, preceding the second section and preceding the prayers in *Hekhalot Rabbati.*[26]

A discussion of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* appears in I. Gruenwald's *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism.*[27] Gruenwald distinguishes between two types of prayers in *Ma'aseh Merkavah*: that type which "lacks the ecstatic quality of the hymns we meet in *Hekhalot Rabbati* and thus resembles common religious poetry," and those at the end of the text (§ 586–596) which contain extensive magical names and thus "expose their magical function." Gruenwald differed with Altmann's view of the priority of the former type and suggests that the latter type may "represent a more original phase of *Hekhalot* hymnology than do their counterparts in *Hekhalot Rabbati.*"[28] Gruenwald's case is in part built on Scholem's assertion that theurgic elements of the Merkavah phenomenon are as old as other elements[29] and on the idea described above that the primary purpose of Merkavah prayer is to induce a mystical trance. It will be seen that this study comes to different conclusions about the history and function of prayers in *Ma'aseh Merkavah.*

Ma'aseh Merkavah is the subject of a recent study by N. Janowitz.[30] In *Poetics*

Rabbati and the later treatise *Massekhet Hekhalot.* But paradoxically, this description is not prevalent in *Ma'aseh Merkavah.*

[23] P. Schäfer, *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (1981). *Ma'aseh Merkavah* extends in the *Synopse* from § 544–596. All references to *Ma'aseh Merkavah* in this study will follow the numbering of the *Synopse*. Other references to Hekhalot literature will also follow the *Synopse* unless otherwise noted. On the implications of Schäfer's edition and his methods for the study of Hekhalot literature, see Chapter 1 below.

[24] Altmann, "*Shire Qedushah,*" 4–5.

[25] On the divisions of the text, see below.

[26] Altmann, "*Shire Qedushah,*" 8. This dating is based on Scholem's opinion (*Major Trends*, 46–47) that the term *'aliyah*, "ascent [to the Merkavah]," which is prevalent in the first part of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, preceded the term *yeridah*, "descent." Scholem's judgment is based on his unproven theory of the antiquity of *Hekhalot Zutarti*, where *'aliyah* is used, in relationship to *Hekhalot Rabbati*, in which *yeridah* predominates. In chapter 18 of this study the dating of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is based primarily on stylistic criteria.

[27] Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic*, 181–90.

[28] Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic*, 182.

[29] Scholem, *Gnosticism*, 75.

[30] N. Janowitz, *The Poetics of Ascent: Theories of Language in a Rabbinic Ascent Text* (1989).

of Ascent, methods developed in structural and ethnographic linguistics are brought to bear on *Ma'aseh Merkavah* for the purposes of examining the theories of language in the text. Janowitz sees *Ma'aseh Merkavah* as expressing a distinct ideology of language in which the employment of the name and the reciting of the hymns accomplishes ascent. In the narrative, which frames reported speech, Rabbis Ishamel and Akiba serve as models for the reader, allowing the reader to participate in the act of ascent.

Janowitz's study is notable for its analysis of how magical language and divine names are used in the text as a whole, and of the implications of these conceptions for linguistic and ritual theory. It does not primarily address questions of the historical implications of the literary nature of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, of the prior development of the text or of the immediate context in which the prayer materials arose.[31] As is explained in Chapter 1 below on the textual study of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, such questions are occasioned by the composite nature of the Hekhalot literature, reflected in the literary evidence for the text. It will be shown that gross variations between the recensions and the inner dynamics of individual units allow us to look into the redactional – and thus the historical – process. In addition, it will be seen that the literary style of the prayers, such as parallelism and the accumulation of synonyms, reflect specific poetic techniques consciously employed by their composers.[32]

Although Janowitz acknowledges that textual variants and the presence of component materials do characterize *Ma'aseh Merkavah*,[33] her focus is on

[31] Janowitz notes that *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is "a contextless text that cannot be placed in a specific historical community" (*Poetics of Ascent*, 15). Her approach to this problem is to see the text as "context creating" by virtue of the speech constructions in the narrative which attribute the power of ascent to the name of the deity in the prayers (ibid., 16). While this makes possible her analysis of the narrative's view of the function of the prayers and their magical names, it leaves open the question of the immediate context (the form critic's *Sitz im Leben*) in which the prayers arose. Cf. her discussion (ibid., 10–11) of Silverstein's distinction between purposive function and indexical function, based on M. Silverstein, "The culture of language in Chinookan narrative texts; or On saying that ... in Chinook," in J. Nichols and A. C. Woodbury, *Grammar Inside and Outside the Clause* (1985), 132.

[32] J. Fox, "Roman Jakobson and the Comparative Study of Parallelism," in D. Armstrong and C. H. van Schooneveld (eds.), *Roman Jakobson: Echoes of His Scholarship* (1977), 59–90, following R. Jakobson, "Parallelism and its Russian Facet," in S. Rudy (ed.), *Roman Jakobson: Selected Writings* (1981), 98, distinguishes between the idea of parallelism as a way of structuring rhetorical language and "canonical parallelism" as a specific poetic technique. Although the parallelism used in *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is not "compulsory," that is, not strictly followed, the term will be used in this latter sense. This analysis will thus deal with the implications of the canonical parallelism of Hebrew poetry in Late Antiquity for *Ma'aseh Merkavah* in its cultural context. Cf. Janowitz, *Poetics of Ascent*, 11–12.

[33] *Poetics of Ascent*, pp. 4 and 22. Manuscript variations and problems of internal coherence are discussed in an appendix, pp. 113–26.

analyzing those materials in the narrative context of one manuscript's recension. Thus *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is treated in effect as a unitary document, reflecting a coherent ideology. In Janowitz's view, all elements and genres within the text – prayers, names, and narrative – contribute to this ideology.[34] Janowitz thus sees homologies between the various stylistic elements of the text and its ideological aspects – for example, between the poetic parallelism of the hymns and the framing structure of the narrative which reflects the text's concept of ascent. Likewise, synonyms are piled up in the name formulae and poetry in the way the heavens are piled up in the cosmology.[35]

The present study takes a different approach. Its goals are to uncover the process of development of the text, place *Ma'aseh Merkavah* primarily in historical context, and from there to consider the contrasting ways in which prayer is used by its composers and redactors. *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is therefore analyzed here form-critically and diachronically, with particular attention to the role of liturgical literature in the text. Literary and text-critical questions are thus placed at the center of this study. In addition, literary forms and styles, particularly of the prayers in *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, are analyzed in comparison with their proximate sources in Jewish liturgical literature, the Hekhalot corpus, and the poetry of the Rabbinic period. It will be shown that these corpora are directly relevant for understanding the function of the prayers in *Ma'aseh Merkavah* as their composers understood it. The results and implications of this inquiry are described in this Introduction below.

A. The Development of the Text

Ma'aseh Merkavah actually consists of three texts, each composed of sayings attributed to Rabbis of the second century C. E. These texts are designated as Sections in this study. These texts consist of prayers framed by narrative. The narrative purports to tell how the these Rabbis acquired Divine visions and secrets. Section I tells how Rabbi Akiba learned the secrets of ascending through the layers of heaven, the Hekhalot, to witness God in His heavenly court and His Merkavah. Sections II and III tell how Rabbi Ishmael conjured the angels who imparted to him the secrets of acquiring wisdom. These angels are known as the "Prince of the Torah" (*Sar ha-Torah*) and the "Angel of the Presence" (*Mal'akh ha-Panim*).[36]

[34] On Janowitz's approach to the problems of composite composition and historical context, see *Poetics of Ascent*, 15–16. Janowitz sees many of the components as reflecting "different tactics but similar general strategies" (p. 16).

[35] ibid., 87–88.

[36] On The *Sar ha-Torah* traditions see Scholem, *Major Trends*, 77–78; and Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic*, 143–44, 185–86.

Indexes

I. Sources

Bible

Rabbinic Literature

Hekhalot Literature (according to *Synopse* number)

Prayers and liturgical compositions

Other texts

II. Hebrew Terms

III. Authors

IV. Angels and Divine Names

V. Subjects

Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum

Alphabetical Index

For a complete catalogue please write to
J. C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) · P.O.Box 2040 · D-7400 Tübingen